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Know Your SCHOOL

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Know Your Board of Education

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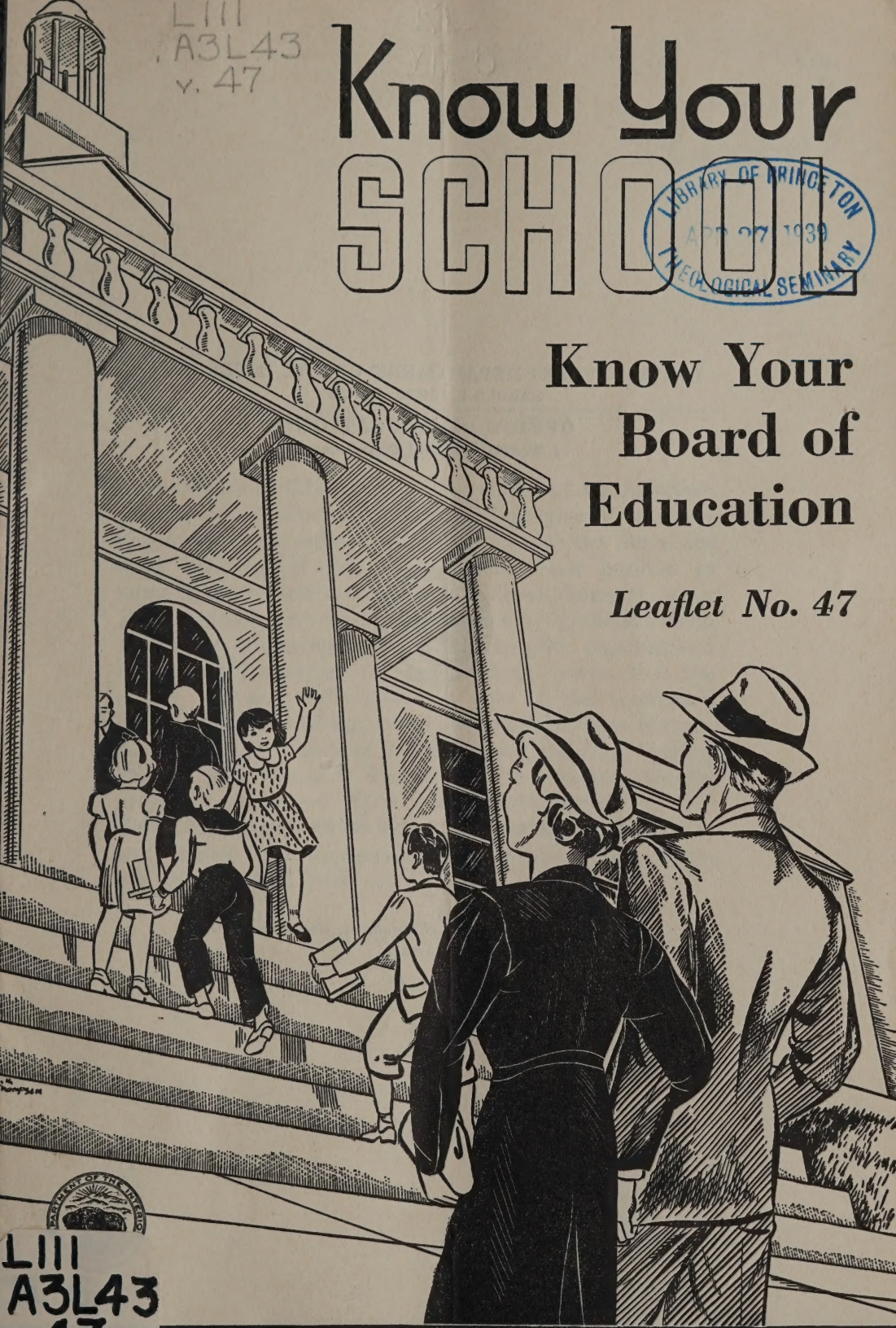

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United States Department of the Interior • *Office of Education*

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FOREWORD

The Office of Education, at the request of the American Association of University Women last year, began the preparation of a series of study outlines for the use of the local branches of that organization. Four outlines in mimeographed form were issued at intervals during the year. They met with such good response not only by the American Association of University Women but by other organizations interested in studying the public-school system that the supply was soon exhausted. In view of the continuing interest, the Office of Education has decided to have the outlines printed as a series of leaflets under the general heading "Know Your School." The titles of the outlines already prepared are "Know Your Board of Education," "Know Your Superintendent," "Know Your School Principal," and "Know Your Teacher." Other outlines in the series will be issued at intervals this year.

BESS GOODYKOONTZ,
Assistant Commissioner of Education.

KNOW YOUR BOARD OF EDUCATION

By

W. S. DEFFENBAUGH

Chief, Division of American School Systems

The whole matter of the kind of schools maintained by a State operating through its several school communities rests with the people. They do not, however, have direct control of education. Between the people and the schools stand the State legislature, State school officials, and local boards of education. Public education being a function of the State government, the State legislature enacts laws providing for the control of the schools. Such control with respect to details of administration and supervision is, however, placed largely in the hands of local boards of education. Since this is true it is incumbent upon the people to make certain that the laws enacted by their State legislatures are such as to permit efficient control. Furthermore, it is essential for them to make certain that such control is exercised by the board of education.

A few of the matters upon which everyone should be informed and about which everyone should have an opinion regarding local boards of education are presented for study and discussion in the following pages:

QUALIFICATIONS

What Qualifications Should School Board Members Possess?

No definite rule can be formulated setting forth qualifications that a school board member should possess. In general, however, it can be said that a board of education should be composed of persons who possess ability in dealing with private and public affairs, sterling character, and breadth of mind, who are convinced of the importance of education; who represent various professional and vocational interests; who are willing and able to give time and energy to the duties of their office; and who clearly understand what their duties are.

SELECTION

How Should School Board Members be Selected?

There are several methods used in the selection of city school board members. Among the methods are election by the people and appointment by the mayor, by the city council, or by the judges of the county court. Each of the various methods has its advocates. Authorities on school administration, however, generally favor election by the people. This is the method used in the majority of the cities of the country.

The opinion of those persons favoring the elective method is that the people take more interest in the schools when members of boards of education are elected; that their appointment by a city officer or officers may place the control of the school in the hands of officials who are generally elected on local municipal issues rather than on school issues which are of State-wide concern; and that the appointing officers may appoint school board members for local political reasons.

On the other hand, it is claimed by those favoring appointment by the mayor that with this method responsibility for the kind of schools maintained by a city can be definitely located. Furthermore, they insist that many persons highly qualified for school board membership will not have their names submitted for election but will accept an appointment.

Should School Board Members Be Selected From the City at Large or by Wards?

That school board members should be selected from the city at large is generally accepted as good practice. Ward or district representation was once common, but today in only a few cities are school board members elected by wards or districts. Under the ward system board members frequently were concerned chiefly with the welfare of the schools of their respective wards rather than with the welfare of the schools of the entire city. The ward system fostered the spirit of getting as much as possible for particular wards; consequently, the schools in sections of a city with the most influential members usually fared best.

If School Board Members Are Elected, Should They Be Elected at a Special School Election?

Most authorities on school administration advocate a special school election. The advantages claimed for this method are that school board members are more likely to be elected without regard to irrelevant issues and partisan politics and that the electors exercise greater care at a special election in voting for well-qualified candidates than they do at a regular city or State election. In the latter case candidates for other offices may be given major consideration, whereas in a special school election the attention of the people is fixed upon their schools. It is argued that if a special election for school board members is not feasible, the names of the candidates for school board membership should at least appear upon the ballot without party designation.

How Should Candidates for School Board Membership Be Nominated?

One of the objections sometimes voiced against the elective method of selecting school board members is that frequently well-qualified citizens will not become candidates for the position, especially if they themselves have to annouce their candidacy or if they have to be nominated at a caucus or party primary. Nomination upon petition of a certain number of qualified electors is doubtless the preferable method.

ORGANIZATION

How Many Members Should Constitute a Board of Education?

Some years ago many cities had large boards of education, sometimes consisting of 30 or more members, but experience has convinced most people that a small board is much more efficient than a large one. There is, however, some difference of opinion as to the number of members that should constitute a small board. The number most frequently advocated is 5, 7, or 9. In practice there are comparatively few boards of education having fewer than 5 members each and not many with more than 9 members each; the most frequent number is

7, and this is the number often advocated. Charles W. Eliot, writing in the *Independent* in 1904 when many city boards of education were large, said, "To my way of thinking, the perfect number is 7 because 7 men can sit around a small table and talk business in a conversational manner. They can talk together in a quiet, simple, direct way, with absolutely no oratory, and no talking to the gallery or to reporters—just plain business talk with specific proposals in view, and under the guidance of a chairman who knows the business and urges it on."

Whether or not 7 is the ideal number, it is the conviction of most people that a small board of 5 to 9 members can transact business much more expeditiously and efficiently than can a large board.

What Should be the Length of Term for Which School Board Members are Elected or Appointed?

A long term with the terms of only one or two members expiring at the same time usually insures a settled administrative policy for at least a few years. A short term even with the terms of only a few members expiring simultaneously may not afford the board an opportunity to give its policies a fair trial. A term of 5 years for each member is generally considered about the right length. If there are 5 members and the term is 5 years, it is usually recommended that provision be made for overlapping terms; that is, one member's term should expire 1 year, another the next, and so on.

Should School Board Members Serve Without Pay?

That members of boards of education should serve without compensation is generally considered more desirable than for them to receive pay for service on such boards. In a few cities, however, board members are paid a per diem for attending board meetings or else a nominal yearly amount. Even a nominal sum is generally considered by authorities on school administration an unnecessary and an unwise expenditure of funds. There are public-spirited citizens in every community, it is argued, who have the welfare of the schools at heart and who will not be deterred from serving on

the board of education through a failure to pay a salary or fees. Less desirable individuals, the argument goes, might be attracted by even a nominal fee.

Should the School Board be Organized with Standing Committees?

When city boards of education were large and before the advent of professionally trained men and women for executive positions in school systems, standing committees probably had a place, but since school boards now employ experts in all departments the need for committees no longer exists. Clearly, the functions of many school board committees, such as those on promotion of pupils, courses of study, and instruction duplicate the functions of the superintendent and his assistants. The superintendent can make recommendations to the entire board just as easily as he can to a committee. If the former is done each member of the board is given an opportunity to consider the recommendation. The board as a whole and not as a half dozen separate committees arrives at decisions.

At times when important matters of policy such as a school-building program or methods of financing the schools arise, it may be desirable to appoint a temporary committee to make in cooperation with the superintendent of schools a study of the situation and to submit a report to the entire board for its careful consideration.

Although committee organization is not recommended by authorities on school administration, a majority of the city boards of education operate on the committee plan, but the tendency appears to be to abandon standing committees or at least to reduce the number of such committees.

POWERS AND FUNCTIONS

What are the Powers and Functions of Boards of Education?

Boards of education are usually granted broad powers by the State legislature, and for the purpose of carrying out requirements of the State regarding educational

functions they are, by necessary implication, vested with considerable discretionary power in matters of detail.

Among the general powers usually expressly conferred upon boards of education by the State are: To appoint administrators, supervisors, teachers, and other employees; to adopt courses of study; to purchase supplies; to acquire school sites; to erect school buildings; to levy taxes or to submit estimates to some other body; to make rules and regulations for the management of the schools; to enforce the compulsory school attendance law; and, in general, to perform such duties as are necessary for the attainment of the ends for which the school districts are organized.

In order to function efficiently a board of education should act as a policy forming body and in an inspectorial or judicial capacity rather than in an executive capacity. As a legislative body it formulates and adopts policies and places the responsibility for the execution of its policies directly in the hands of the superintendent of schools, and in due time ascertains whether the policies are working out satisfactorily and if not why not.

Among the many problems upon which a board of education should act in its policy forming capacity are those relating to the selection of the superintendent of schools, the school budget, the acquisition of school sites, new school buildings, the expansion of the educational system, the organization of the school, and salary schedules.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INVESTIGATION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the qualifications of school board members as prescribed by law in your State?
2. Should school board members have certain educational qualifications, as high-school or college education? Should educational qualifications be specified by law?
3. Should various vocations be represented on the board membership?
4. List in order of importance the qualifications that school board members should possess.

5. How are city school board members in your State selected? Is the same method used in all the cities of the State?
6. Should the size of the city be a factor in determining how school board members should be selected?
7. Would an election for school board members held at some other time than the general city or State election be feasible in your city? Would the same purposes be served if a separate nonpartisan ballot were used at a general election?
8. Suggest a plan for placing men and women in nomination so as to induce those well qualified for the position to become candidates.
9. Is the following plan suggested in a city school survey report sound in principle and feasible?

> The matter of nominating candidates can be intrusted to a committee, 100 or more in number, made up of representative men and women chosen for the purpose from various civic bodies in the city which are working in a non-political way for the betterment of conditions and for the progress of the city. Such a committee, coming together for the purpose of inviting representative men and women of the community to stand before the public as candidates for a place on the board of education and guaranteeing such candidates their support would serve to induce men and women to take places on the board.

10. List the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods of selecting school board members.
11. What is the size of city school boards in your State and what tendencies with respect to their size have been manifest during the past 25 years?
12. Should a large city have a larger school board than a small city?
13. What is the length of term for which school board members in your State are elected or appointed? Are their terms overlapping?
14. What tendencies have been manifest during the past 25 years with respect to length of term for which board members in your State are chosen and with respect to the overlapping of their terms?
15. How many and what standing committees does the board of education in your city have? What are the

duties of each committee? Do they have any duties that cannot be performed as well by the entire board or by the superintendent and his assistants?

16. If the board of education in your city has recently abolished standing committees or reduced the number of such committees, what results have been noticeable with respect to the thoroughness with which the entire board considers educational policies?
17. Why should school board members receive no salary except possibly a per diem for attending a reasonable number of board meetings?
18. What are the powers conferred upon city boards of education in your State? Are such powers sufficiently broad? In what ways are the powers and duties of city school boards in your State regulated or limited by legislative enactment? By rulings of the State Department of Education?
19. What is the relationship of the State department of education in your State to the city school districts?
20. List in order of importance at least 10 duties of city school boards.
21. Are the city boards of education in your State fiscally independent; that is, may they levy taxes for the support of the schools or adopt a budget without the approval of some municipal body? Should city boards of education be fiscally independent?
22. Explain the difference between policy making functions and executive functions regarding the work of a board of education. Is it ever advisable for a board of education to assume executive functions? Compare the work of a board of education with that of a board of directors of a private corporation.

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See "The Education Index" and "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature" for articles in journals of education on the school board.

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